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1. Form and Formlessness

“[B]lack seas of infinity”; “nameless monstrosity”; “old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part.”; beings with “shape...not made of matter,” “free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside”; “*geometry*” that is “*all wrong*”; “cosmic horrors,” “utter mystery, terrible antiquity, and unearthly strangeness”; things that “cannot be described.”¹

“[U]ndimensioned and to us unseen,” “shape without sight or substance,” spheres of force and matter, space and time”; “not of tri-dimensional earth,” shapeless,” formless,” “teratologically fabulous,” “follow[ing] the symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to earth or the solar system”; “an impossibility in a normal world,” “some nameless place for some nameless purpose.”²

“[T]errors unutterable and unimaginable”; “whole worlds of matter, energy, and life which lie close at hand yet can never be detected with the senses we have”; “vistas unknown to man”; “infinite, sightless, soundless space”; “unrecognisable shapes”; “Indescribable shapes.”³

The writing of H.P. Lovecraft is remarkable for its persistent evocation of phenomena that fall outside human systems of thought and language. Each of Lovecraft’s major tales centers on some exemplary figure of doctrinaire humanism whose sanity, by which I mean whose capacity to sustain norms of rational thought and possessive individualism, is shaken by an encounter with unthinkable beings. It is these beings’ incommensurability with conceptual rationality, historical time, Euclidean geometry, and language, several accounts of which appear above, that make these tales so productive for those recent philosophical projects seeking nonhuman, anti-correlationist systems of thought.⁴ Equally remarkable and well documented, but less central to recent attempts to develop new theoretical methods, is what Donna Haraway has called the “misogynist racial-nightmare” that must be understood as the source and the exemplar of Lovecraft’s formless things.⁵ Formlessness is explicitly *abject* in Lovecraft, and even a casual reading of his stories reveals the conceptual frame through which this abjection is attributed to be isomorphic with the logic of racialization.⁶ This is evident in fictional renderings of “dark cults...infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles,” “hysterical Levantines,” “degenerate Eskimos,” areas of “traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men,” and “swarthy cult-fiends” seen as manifesting “some peculiarly abominable quality about them which made their destruction seem almost a duty,” all of which appear in close proximity to the ostensibly timeless, alien beings upon which Lovecraft’s mythos is centered.⁷ And the same correlation becomes visible in Lovecraft’s nonfiction, most overtly in an infamous letter of March 21st 1924 in which he describes the lower East Side slums as a “hideous cesspool” inhabited by “monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth’s corruption” that “could not by any stretch of the imagination be call’d human.”⁸

These written accounts disclose two interlinked systems of abjection: the first comprises form and formlessness at the level of conceptualization and language, and the second comprises the procedures of racialization that, as scholars from Cedric Robinson to Jodi Melamed have shown, undergird the capitalist mode of production in originary and ongoing ways.⁹ What becomes visible at their intersection? I am struck by the continuity between the excerpts from Lovecraft reproduced above and Robinson's observation that, to "the Europeans who witnessed the uprisings of African peoples" during the Atlantic slave trade, "the forms that Black resistance assumed were incomprehensible," so that "many such witnesses fell easily into whatever language was on hand to evoke mystery: the participants in Black resistance were seen as having reverted to savagery; were under the influence of satanic madmen; had passed beyond the threshold of sanity."¹⁰ Comprehensibility is shown here, as it is in Lovecraft, to be determined not by universal criteria but by historically specific coordinates that can in themselves reveal much about the conditions under which certain systems of thought, and representation become established and normalized. So while it is tempting to focus on Lovecraft's genealogical link to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, perhaps in order to pursue a reading of his work as some direct expression of the Eurocentric racial ontology that secures practices of settler colonialism, I am primarily concerned with structural (rather than subjective and intentional) conditions. The contention with which the following pages engage is this: evocations of a certain idea of formlessness as the image of aberration *par excellence* reveal something of the critical relationship between formalisation (linguistic, conceptual) and the logical structure of a socioeconomic order for which racialization (as well as normative logics of gender, sexuality, and ability) is a fundamental operation.

So: the form/formless distinction examined here is not universal and ontological, but historical and epistemological. It is a distinction made and sustained by the complex, ever-shifting knot of capture, exploitation, and immiseration otherwise known as capitalism. As such, inquiry into the theoretical and representational coordinates of form and formlessness is here understood as having the potential to reveal something significant about the mediating optics of an economic system that is predicated on ongoing, increasingly sophisticated and granular processes of accumulation by enclosure and dispossession. Put briefly, I am interested in what the discursive maintenance of states of form and formlessness reveals about the ongoing centrality of conditions of abjection to modes of capitalist accumulation that, on the surface at least, tend to be imagined as functioning through integration, not exclusion. In other words, logical and imaginative constructions of form and formlessness are here analyzed for what they reveal about techniques of capture—in both conceptual and purely physical terms—as they are unevenly implemented upon social life.¹¹ In marking the sutures linking abstract structures of conceptualization and representation to concrete systems of sociopolitical and economic violence, these revelations can clarify the political stakes surrounding the valorization of form in general. They also call attention to the investment in surfaces, forms, and diagrams of countable relations that characterizes much recent work in the humanities and social sciences, whether digital or otherwise. I'll return to some of these projects later, but at this point I want to be clear that my interest is not directed at a symptomatic reading of the critical impulses they embody (although such a reading is surely possible). Rather, I am interested in identifying the ways in which the specific insights and approaches these methods present might be deployed as part of a dialectical engagement with capitalist imaginaries centred on form and formlessness.

This essay, then, proposes the cognitive privileging of form and its concomitant

processes of formalization as unmarked protocols of a capitalist mode of production whose stages of primitive accumulation, formal subsumption, and real subsumption are not finite and sequential but ongoing and intertwined. For what is primitive accumulation if not the capture and enclosure of land, the conversion of matter into a field of resources awaiting commodification, and the objectification of living bodies as property, all of which can be understood as processes of formalization? What is formal subsumption if not the capture of certain activities via the wage relation (in this case, the secret is in the name, hiding in plain sight)? Marx's understanding of labor as "living, form-giving fire" appears especially telling here, but perhaps the clearest formulation comes in Diane Elson's insistence that Marx's *Capital* sets out not a theory of the objective relationship between labor time and prices but an examination of labor as "an historical process of *forming what is intrinsically unformed*."¹² And what is real subsumption if not the insistence that sociality can be formed without remainder into a network of exchange relations? Equally, primitive accumulation dissolves any social relation that might make the wage relation inessential, formal subsumption confers nonproductive (formless) status onto a tranche of reproductive practices, and real subsumption cannot reduce—indeed, is premised upon and amplifies—the production of surplus populations that cannot be absorbed into the wage. Each of these phenomena must be understood as distinct and irreducible to a single process, as Frank B. Wilderson, III shows when, drawing on Saidiya V. Hartman, he distinguishes the exploitation of the wage laborer from the fungibility of the slave.¹³ However, an examination of the historical relations of form and formlessness might allow one to think these disparate impositions of capital together without conflating them, as well as to track the logics that ground them.

What is the relationship between abstract conceptualization—such as that of the distinction between form and formlessness—and the imaginaries that ground and determine social life? Georges Bataille evokes the sociopolitical import of the form/formlessness relation as it is expressed in philosophy when he writes "*formless* is not only an adjective having such and such a meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that every thing should have a form."¹⁴ "For academics to be satisfied," he suggests, "it would be necessary, in effect, for the universe to take on a form."¹⁵ Although this account of conceptualization, centred as it is on "academics," appears concentrated in the field of abstract thought, Bataille also suggests that this formlessness translates into concrete effects at the level of social violence: that which does not take on a form after being filtered by abstract conceptualization "does not, in any sense whatever, possess rights, and everywhere gets crushed like a spider or an earthworm."¹⁶ If, following Alfred Sohn-Rethel, one takes the emergence of formal conceptual systems as a stage of knowledge that corresponds directly with the epoch of commodity production, then the epistemic disavowal of formlessness that Bataille identifies can be located more clearly in relation to specific historical forces.¹⁷ But grasping the conceptual dynamics of this relationship is not as straightforward as equating form with "inside" and formless with "outside" because, critically, the dispossession Bataille specifies is not simply of the order of excommunication or exclusion. For Bataille, the state "formless" not only confers a dispossession, but also functions as a precondition for that which is understood as "form." "Formless" functions here not as a simple antonym but as "a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that every thing should have a form." It is the aberration that precedes and secures the norm, as in Georges Canguilhem's observation that "the pathological, while logically second, is existentially first."¹⁸

Taking Bataille's tantalizing sentences as a starting point, how might one understand and historicize the contradictory relationship between these two constructions of form and formlessness, the first conceptual and linguistic, and the second socioeconomic? Perhaps surprisingly, the components of such an approach can be located in two texts whose primary interests seem to lie in securing Lovecraft's literary and philosophical import against his explicit racism: Michel Houellebecq's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991) and Graham Harman's *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012).

Houellebecq evokes the spatial and cognitive structure of Lovecraft's fictional worlds in terms that are uncannily close to two interlinked imaginaries: the network societies of informatic-financial flows that characterize late modernity and to the types of Actor-Network methodologies that ground much recent, anti-critical cultural analysis:

The surface of the planet today is covered in a chain-linked mesh of associations that join together to form a man-made network of irregular density.

Through this network, society's lifeblood circulates. The transport of people, of merchandise, of commodities; multiple transactions, sales orders, purchase orders, bits of information, all pass each other by; there are also other, more strictly intellectual or affective exchanges that occur. This incessant flux bewilders humanity, engrossed as it tends to be by the cadaverous leaps and bounds of its own activities.

But in a few spots where the network's links are weakly woven, strange entities may allow a seeker, one who "thirsts for knowledge," to discern their existence. In every place where human activity is interrupted, where there is *a blank on the map*, these ancient gods crouch huddled waiting to take back their rightful place.¹⁹

The "mesh of associations" depicted here clearly evokes the information-theoretical constructions of social life whose investments recur across neoclassical economics (with its ideal of human capital and communicational concepts of markets), technical systems of networked computation, and the lineage of sociological imaginaries that stretches at least from Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* to the more recent projects pursued by Bruno Latour.²⁰ And, in this formulation, the Lovecraftian "ancient gods" are not located outside the mesh of associations. Rather, these "strange entities" persist on (or *as*) the ground upon which those networks are constructed. To borrow an intriguing formula set out by Jacques Lacan in a chapter in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* titled "Of the Network of Signifiers," "*the [Lovecraftian] gods belong to the field of the real.*"²¹ Which is to say, they belong to the field of phenomena that precede and inform the symbolic realm of discrete concepts and language, but which cannot be symbolized without loss.

With this real/symbolic distinction in mind, certain media-theoretical approaches reveal something striking about the contradictory logic that connects racial capitalism to systems of formal thought and representation: *that which is disavowed as formless is also that which makes form possible*. Framed in terms of mediation (via Claude Shannon and Michel Serres), Lovecraft's emblems of formlessness structurally parallel the noise that both pre-exists and forms the precondition for signal, but that must also be filtered out in order to make signal (or symbols) optimally legible.²² Serres, for example, points out that a "graphic form"—such as a written symbol—always "comprises an essential form and a field of noise that is either essential or occasional."²³ This recognition prefigures his later, more general claim that "difference is part of the thing itself, and perhaps it even produces the thing. Maybe the radical origin of things is really that difference, even though classical rationalism damned it to hell. In the beginning was the noise."²⁴

Tellingly, in the historicist, media-theoretical reading of Lacan pursued by Friedrich Kittler and developed by Bernhard Siegert, this noise (like Lacan's gods) comes from the field of the real.²⁵ Thought through the conflation of mediation and valorization that constitutes the epistemic grounding of capital, the ostensibly formless real theorized by Lacan, Serres, Kittler, and Siegert appears isomorphic with the structural position of sociality that 1) exists before (symbolic) relations of exchange and that is 2) captured and filtered into productive forms by those relations. Marx suggests as much when he writes that, "in so far as the commodity or labour is now only determined as exchange value, and the relationship of the different commodities to each other is now only determined as the mutual exchange—the equating—of these exchange values, the individuals—the subjects between whom this process takes place—are only and simply determined as exchangers."²⁶ This connection between information-theoretical and sociocultural logics is particularly clear in Serres's suggestion that "noise" might constitute "both the collective and the sound coming from the black box"—both sociality before formalization *and* that which is decreed superfluous for the purposes of producing a given formalization; or, both that which constitutes the precondition or raw material for exchange *and* that remainder which is judged superfluous to exchange.²⁷

If Houellebecq's network-theoretical positioning of Lovecraft's "strange entities" allows one to glimpse the complex systems of inclusion and abjection that are configured through the mediating dynamics of capital, a second claim—this one found in Harman's *Weird Realism*—points towards the structural function of this contradiction vis-à-vis processes of accumulation. Harman, addressing Lovecraft's racism through the above-quoted evocation of "hysterical Levantines" in "the Call of Cthulthu," writes the following extraordinary sentences:

While abominable in ethical and political terms, Lovecraft's racism is undeniably productive in literary terms... While one can easily imagine a bitter critique of this passage by the late Edward Said, in a certain sense Said's critique would miss the point. However blameworthy as a sample of Orientalism, Lovecraft's reference to a mob of hysterical Levantines is genuinely frightening, presumably even for readers from present-day Lebanon and Syria.²⁸

Many of this passage's most troubling aspects—notably those "engaging" with Said—are so overt as to make critical engagement unnecessary. The passage does, however, turn on a statement that warrants serious engagement: the pivotal claim that, "While abominable in ethical and political terms, Lovecraft's racism is undeniably productive in literary terms." If one parses this claim against the historical systems of capture and disavowal invoked above, one finds oneself looking at a striking formulation of racialization as a structural process central to both liberalism and capitalist accumulation: *While abominable in ethical and political terms, racialization is undoubtedly productive in economic terms.*

As suggested above, there is a certain point of view from which the valorization of form and the construction and disavowal of formlessness appears as nothing more than the result of those systems of liberal thought and social management that are concomitant with the cultural logic of the commodity. From this point of view the distinction simply cleaves to the set of binary oppositions that includes those between waged/unwaged and productive/nonproductive activity.²⁹ While not inaccurate, though, this analysis fails to account for the seemingly contradictory dynamics identified in the preceding paragraphs: the superimposed possibility of valorization and expulsion that functions as a precondition (or raw material) for capitalism's mediation of sociality. More concretely, an

exclusive focus on the overt appearances of (for example) production and reproduction occludes the conceptual schema underlying those violent abstractions—not only the commodity form and the wage relation, but also race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, amongst many more—that are imbricated with the historical dynamics and ongoing processes of capitalist accumulation.

The dynamics of 1) the violent imposition of form, and 2) the paradoxical construction of formlessness as at once precondition, aberration, and suspended source of potential future value can be identified in a number of imbricated procedures structuring the history of capitalist accumulation.

a) Accumulation, the imposition of form, and the invention of formlessness

As Rosa Luxemburg writes: “capitalism in its full maturity...depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and social organizations existing side by side with it.”³⁰ Or, as the Endnotes collective put it, “There must be an exterior to value in order for value to exist,” and “for labor to exist and serve as the measure of value, there must be an exterior to labor.”³¹ The problems evoked here by the term “exterior” emphasize the conceptual superposition between non-value and prospective future value in which such strata and social organizations are positioned under the structural logic of capital. In the middle of the nineteenth century Marx observed that such populations are simultaneously “surplus” to the needs of capital and essential to the emergence and stability of those needs, functioning as “the lever of capitalistic accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production.”³² As such, they might better be understood as a ground (although this does not mean that they should be understood as *primitive*): as the analogy with the information-theoretical concept of “noise” emphasizes, it is a logical necessity that such forms of sociality must preexist and then co-exist with their parsing and forming into value-productive relations thorough the mechanisms of labor. Equally, just as that specific, technical concept of noise is brought into existence as such by the concept of signal, these modes of sociality become intelligible as formless only in relation to and from the perspective of capitalist social imaginaries.

Mechanisms of primitive accumulation—enclosure, colonization, and enslavement, amongst many others—can thus be understood as proceeding through the violent imposition of form, but also by positing their targets as unformed or primitive but potentially formable while removing the functional capacity for these subjects to choose which side of the form/formless line they inhabit.³³ This procedure undergirds what Marx calls (with “dark humor,” as Hartman notes) “double” freedom: freedom to sell labor power, and freedom from any possession or mode of sociality that would make such a transaction unnecessary.³⁴ It also extends, with increasing scope and complexity, through multiple stages of accumulation and subsumption (which are revealed, from this perspective, to be ongoing and intertwined rather than discrete and in sequence): from the factory-based model that Marx dissects through the progressive search for supplements to these underlying sites of accumulation in regimes such as the spectacle, financialization, and biocapital and in forms of labor that have been variously described as affective, cognitive, and immaterial. This last point is underscored by Silvia Federici’s observation that the Structural Adjustment Program negotiated between the Nigerian Government and the World Bank in the mid-1980s in order to “make Nigeria competitive on the international market” in fact involved “a new round of primitive accumulation, and a rationalization of social reproduction aimed at destroying the last vestiges of communal property and community relations”—a rationalization that

included measures to “regulate procreation rates, and, in this case, reduce the size of a population that was deemed too demanding and undisciplined from the viewpoint of its prospected insertion in the global economy.”³⁵

In the context of these ever-intensifying processes of accumulation, systems of racialization and gendering function as two of the dominant mechanisms through which formlessness—the projection of aberrant, non-productive, and, thus, non-human status—is ascribed to groups that either precede and must be captured (formed) by capitalist social relations, or that have not (or have not yet) been captured by them. These dynamics are visible in Lovecraft’s horrified accounts of “undimensioned” things and are critiqued in Robinson’s description of Black resistance as “incomprehensible” to European witnesses. The temporal aspects of this incomprehensibility, which can only be understood as such in relation to capital’s logics of comprehension—those of value extraction and symbolic exchange—are illustrated in a letter from the November 21, 1857 issue of *The Times* that Marx gleefully recounts in the *Grundrisse*. With “great moral Indignation,” an advocate for “the reintroduction of Negro slavery” writes to project the “free blacks of Jamaica” as aberrant because they disavow the temporal and spatial formalizations of the wage, labor time, commodities, plantations, and social reproduction: they “content themselves to produce only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption,” “regard loafing itself...as the real luxury article,” “don’t give a damn about sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations,” and “react with malicious pleasure and sardonic smiles when a planter goes to ruin.”³⁶ This passage underscores the equation between colonial-capitalist rationality and the construction, from that same point-of-view, of form and formlessness; unable to figure the objects of his disgust as either fungible commodity (slave) or generative labor power (waged worker), the author of this letter nonetheless retains the dynamics of racialization that are inseparable from both. In so doing he posits form and formlessness as sociohistorical conditions that are conferred, often through a complex relation to racialization, onto lives that either can or cannot be conceptually resolved to networks of exchange. With these historical dynamics in mind, expressions of sociality beyond the comprehension of Marx’s indignant advocate might be understood as encompassing not only conditions of dispossession but also “the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” that “racializing assemblages of subjection...can never annihilate.”³⁷

b) Intensified accumulation and suspended surplus

Although it serves as a precondition for capitalist accumulation in general, the ground (or noise) of sociality is never exhausted or fully subsumed in one movement, although the spiraling cultural logic of capital is such that full subsumption tends to be posited either as prospect or a reality both by advocates (e.g. Gary Becker) and critics (e.g. Antonio Negri). This is why none of the concepts evoked in these pages—formless, noise, sociality—should be taken as equivalent to Hardt and Negri’s multitude.³⁸ The production of surplus populations on or below the threshold of survival is a secular feature, rather than an accidental byproduct or the outcome of some cyclical crisis.³⁹ In Marx’s time, this production of surplus populations functioned as a precondition for accumulation because it provided a standing reserve of potential workers and because it functioned to regulate wages—roles that do not necessarily guarantee reintegration into the sphere of labor because intensified accumulation is inseparable from a general increase in the organic composition of capital. It is this suspended but essential status, which is overwhelmingly conferred onto racialized populations, that forms a central object of analysis for Hartman as well as for Afro-pessimist scholars such as Wilderson.

As the latter puts it, “the black subject, the slave, is vital to civil society’s political economy: s/he kick-starts capital at its genesis and rescues it from its over-accumulation crisis at its end.”⁴⁰

This suspension of certain populations (or “non-capitalist strata”) between states of surplus and potential is not, however, fixed to a single historical model. Neferti X.M. Tadiar shows how the norm of the creative and/or entrepreneurial subject that is produced by the social formation often dubbed “neoliberalism” leads to a reformulated (albeit structurally comparable) version of the form/formless distinction that supplements the older logics of labor supply and wage-regulation. This version is organized not only around the binary of productive and non- (or not-yet-) productive, but also through the sundering of life into that which is directly productive and that which is disposable but that can yield profit when configured as the raw material upon which new industries of management and securitization operate. Tadiar phrases this distinction as one between the capitalization and commodification of life, writing that:

the absolute mercantilization or commodification of life (as distinct from its capitalization) manifests itself in global industries of war, security (global antiterrorism, including US military operations in west Asia, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific and the Israeli occupation of Palestine; border management and detention of “illegals” in the United States and Europe), bioeconomics (organ trade, commercial surrogacy, and biological reproduction), and protection (medical and political asylum granted through varieties of state humanitarianism), as well as local, informal “occult economies” and syndicated commercial trade in life and death (drug and human trafficking, kidnap for ransom).⁴¹

Where capitalizable life yields value through the forms of creative, flexible, affective, or (so-called) immaterial labor, commodified life is discarded from the sutured categories of humanity and productivity and is either mined for whatever residual value can be extracted through the labor of private doctors, researchers, soldiers, and guards, or left to the “informal” economies that ostensibly function outside capitalist networks and rules of law. Commodified life becomes “*life as waste*—disposable material whose management has generated an entire “province of accumulation.”⁴² It is difficult to miss the isomorphism between this distinction and the one Marx makes when he writes that “a particular product may be used as both instrument of labor and as raw material in the same process. Take, for instance, the fattening of cattle, where the animal is the raw material, and at the same time an instrument for the production of manure.”⁴³ Tadiar’s intervention, which extends Marx’s distinction between instrument and raw material to forms of human life, emphasizes the fact that the construct “form/formlessness” (or “with rights/rightless,” or “signal/noise”) is not a fixed, ahistorical binary of inclusion and exclusion but a complex, shifting, and ever-intensifying relation that is imbricated with the shifting dynamics of accumulation and subsumption. In emphasizing this historical process, though, Tadiar does not confine non-productive (or not directly productive) life to the realm of suspension and remaindering. Crucially, such states also produce highly specific modes of “life making,” “sense making,” and “dimensions of flight” that she calls “life-times.”⁴⁴ The stakes of any inquiry into the dynamics of form and formlessness extend to marking the existence of these “life-times” as well as diagnosing the conditions that abject them.

2. On Method

As they develop in complexity and reach, the logics of accumulation and remaindering

described above produce and adopt new formations of knowledge. Cybernetics, information theory, and the networked modes of anthropology and sociology touched upon above constitute part of one such formation. The recent turn to surfaces, forms, and object-networks in cultural analysis constitutes another.⁴⁵ The connexionist, black-box ethos that animates each of these fields is imbricated with—both shapes and is shaped by—dominant logics of distributed accumulation, computational finance, and the production of waste, commodified, or managed life.⁴⁶ Such optics also function to occlude the complex dynamics of forming and surplus-making that constitute capitalism and its systems of thought. As the account sketched above should make clear, modes of cultural analysis directed in an unmarked way towards the diagramming and valorization of form are insufficient for grasping either the violent dynamics of capture and suspension that are imbricated with the historical trajectory of the form/formless distinction or the practices of living, sensing, liberation, and flight that Tadiar and Weheliye are so careful to retain within their respective analyses. Beyond (but not excluding) such approaches, I here propose a mode of dialectical analysis attuned to both the particularities and the constraints of given forms. Such an approach would be able to attend both to diagrammatic formulations and the violence specific to their imposition—forms of violence that, whether proceeding through enclosure, exploitation, or the suspension between waste and resource, always also imply (and, at a higher level of complexity, threaten to capture) specific modes of life and liberation.

One set of coordinates for such an approach can be found in Carolyn Lesjak's essay "Reading Dialectically." Responding to the recent swathe of methodological texts animated by a common disciplinary modesty—broadly put, the notion that "reading literature is what we literary scholars do best and hence what we ought to return to doing after having lost our way in the heady theory days of the 1960s–90s"—Lesjak points out that such approaches, which tend to call for a return to surfaces or forms, are premised on a "refusal to distinguish between that which is *constituted* and that which is *constitutive*."⁴⁷ What is this refusal if not the foundational gesture from which emerges the systems of thought, representation, definition, exclusion, and suspension that I have been interrogating through the relations of form and formlessness? Analytic methods premised on such a refusal can dutifully attend to the linguistic, symbolic, or conceptual makeup of a given text or social arrangement, but they can say nothing of either the ground from which these elements are selections or the processes of selection and exclusion that constitute the passage from ground to figure. Rather than better ways of delineating and sticking to that which is specific to literary studies, Lesjak suggests, what is required "is a better way of reading surfaces as perverse, rather than as obvious, as never identical to themselves in their "thereness," and always found within and constitutive of complex spatial relations, both seen and not seen, deep and lateral, material and figural."⁴⁸ Inverting the "refusal to distinguish" (rather than simply shifting the focus from constituted to constitutive phenomena) is of particular importance: I am here arguing not for the erasure of forms or the repudiation of formalisms, but for their retention alongside the otherwise unmarked procedures of constitution upon which they are premised. Such an approach might proceed, for example, by marking a given form with the originary and ongoing modes of sociality from which it is selected and the systems of violence through which this selection functions.

Consider Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's suggestion that, after Abu Ghraib, Hurricane Katrina, and eight years of the Bush administration, literature scholars might realize that "not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading," and that "alongside nascent fascism there might be better ways of thinking and

being simply there for the taking, in both the past and the present.”⁴⁹ What if one were to extend this formulation so that it encompassed a recognition of surface phenomena *and* the understanding that these phenomena are premised on and occlude historical forces whose implications might require “deep” or symptomatic engagement?⁵⁰ In Lovecraft, for example, certain conceptual dynamics are indeed on the surface of the text and require no interpretive work, none of the reading for “silences, gaps, style, tone, and imagery as symptoms of the queerness or race absent only apparently from its pages.”⁵¹ The surface of these texts explicates a conceptual structure—the conceptual structure of that “conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.”⁵² And, as Sohn-Rethel shows, under capitalism conceptual structures are bound to historical context in unmarked ways; they are occluded by the same logic that produces them. Methods of surface or form-centric reading present part of the equation through which this occlusion can be undone, but they must be paired with a second stage of analysis that locates the concrete, extra-textual implications of the formal and conceptual structures that constitute a given surface.

3. The Contexts of Forms

In the collection for which Best and Marcus’s “Surface Reading” serves as an introduction, Margaret Cohen proposes a literary-critical method of “just enough reading” that seeks the “configuration that provides a coherent pattern, rather than prolonging analysis until one has read exhaustively.”⁵³ Cohen’s representative example for the illustration of this method is eighteenth century sea adventure fiction. That genre’s exemplary texts are, she argues, “not susceptible to intensive reading,” partly because their plots unfold “in the performance of action” but also because their narrative arcs are structured around information processing—a convention which “only impoverishes the novel from the standpoint of a poetic tradition privileging exegesis over performance.”⁵⁴ Cohen suggests that, because of this information-processing structure, the reader of sea adventures receives not an aesthetic experience but a playful education in the work of rational problem solving, forms of “flexibility and creativity that are part of practical capacity,” and procedures of “organizing information... with a pragmatic experience of the imagination to come up with a solution.”⁵⁵ She then goes on to make the following, striking observation:

In sea adventure fiction, work appears in the guise of the playful organization and transformation of information... From the archive of forgotten aesthetics, then, comes a form of the novel driven by the performance of skilled work. Perhaps adventure genres more generally are the genres of the novel that represent *the labor process*.⁵⁶

This observation is striking not only for its compelling reading of the genre in question, which (correctly) identifies a genealogy of “playful,” flexible, cognitive labor that precedes the accumulation crises of the twentieth century, but also for the way in which it connects aesthetic form (eighteenth to early-twentieth century sea adventures in general, or *Robinson Crusoe* and *Lord Jim* in particular), an abstract conceptual structure (the processing of information as a privileged mode of action), and specific historical phenomena (rationalized labor and its concomitant processes of sense-conditioning).⁵⁷ As tantalizing as the methodologies implied by this approach are, Cohen’s elaboration neglects the historicity of the form-abstraction-accumulation complex around which it turns. Because of this, she cannot account for the ways in which that complex is both violently and unevenly implemented before and alongside its appearance in allegorical form. What might a version of this approach reveal, for example, if its historicist-

formalist reading practice was augmented with the conceptual and practical imbrication of navigation, steering, information processing, colonialism, and accumulation—a complex whose various implementations shape the period upon which Cohen focuses and a succession of subsequent moments increasingly marked by the simultaneous production of creative or informational labor, remaindering, and the many stages of life-processing that lie between them? In any case, Cohen’s intervention gestures towards the ways in which analyses of form can evoke “deep” or contextual conditions such as the systems of thought and representation upon which capitalist accumulation and its ontologies are premised. By way of a conclusion, the following sections examine two methodological texts concerned with methodology and form, Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy* (2015) and Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* (2014), in order to identify further ways in which such approaches might open out into specific instantiations of the selectivity and violence of forming whose protocols are established above.

i) Politics as form(ing)

Levine’s *Forms* turns on the insistence that politics should be recognized as matters of form—an observation that, once accepted, reveals the long-established antinomy between formal and historicist literary analysis to be premised on a false distinction. As Levine puts it, her approach “makes a case for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience,” and in so doing promises to dissolve the “traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context.”⁵⁸ The contours of this method are immediately established through a brief reading of a passage from *Jane Eyre*:

In the morning, a bell rings loudly to wake the girls. When it rings a second time, “all formed in file, two and two, and in that order descended the stairs.” On hearing a verbal command, the children move into “four semicircles, before four chairs, placed at the four tables; all held books in their hands.” When the bell rings again, three teachers enter and begin an hour of Bible reading before the girls march in to breakfast...Critics are used to reading Lowwoods disciplinary order as part of the novel’s content and context, interpreting the school experience as indispensable to Jane’s maturation, for example, or as characteristic of trends in nineteenth century education. But what are Lowwoods’s shapes and arrangements—its semicircles, timed durations, and ladders of achievement—if not themselves kinds of *form*?⁵⁹

From here Levine is able to argue that the “shapes and arrangements” evoked in Brontë’s novel are neither aesthetic formulations nor abstractions, but direct evocations of the “social arrangements” produced by a concept of politics which she, following Rancière, defines as “a matter of distributions and arrangements.”⁶⁰ To observe that such a method might be unable to account for processes of exclusion and suspension would be neither novel nor unique. Indeed, Levine’s project is held up by Lesjak as exemplary of the ways in which “The impulse to be affirmative, to talk about what texts do rather than what they don’t do, occludes the negation upon which such affirmation is based—in this example, the ontological assumptions structuring what appears ‘in the text.’”⁶¹ However, the notion that this grounding occlusion means that one should discard thinking through forms entirely risks disengagement from the protocols of capital and power at the precise point at which they operate upon social life. Perhaps Levine’s provocation is productive not so much for the immediate literary-critical method it advocates as for the determining processes of imposition and occlusion that it motivates one to consider.

What becomes apparent if one follows Levine, however provisionally, in understanding modern politics as a set of protocols for “enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries—such as nation-states, bounded subjects, and domestic walls” while also understanding these protocols as functionally isomorphic with the procedures through which acts of writing produce literary forms?⁶² What do the properties or affordances of specific forms imply about what happens to bodies, groups, objects, or other phenomena that do not correspond to the prescribed “shapes and arrangements”? Here one finds oneself back at the structural isomorphism between discrete symbolic mediation and sociality that is the point-of-view of capital, but not that of the concrete phenomena that are captured by it. As Kittler notes and Levine does not, “[t]o record the sound sequences of speech, literature has to arrest them in a system of 26 letters, thereby categorically excluding all noise sequences.”⁶³ To grasp the full significance of this observation as it scales from alphabet to sociality one must include the alphabet, the noise and the protocols through which the former instrumentalizes and reduces the latter, as Serres suggests when he remarks that “graphic form” is always partly comprised of “noise that is either essential or occasional.”⁶⁴

The type of media-theoretical imaginary that allows formalization to appear unmarked by its sociopolitical connotations can be gleaned from Levine’s brief engagement with Marx, which she presents in direct response to Lesjak’s critique of her work on grounds of occlusion and quietism. Defending her commitment to “radical social change,” Levine diagrams Marx’s “classic slogan” about ability and need as “a careful balancing of inputs and outputs, a structural parallelism that might well govern the organization of energies and distributions in a radical and just new order.”⁶⁵ Balance, input and output; governing, organization, energy, and distribution. The cybernetic character of this social vision is clear enough. But if this is a formal diagram of Marxian politics, where does one locate the forms of racialized, gendered, remaindered life upon whose suspension the positive registering of inputs and outputs is premised? Should one trust that the mechanisms that impose such states simply disappear once the correct balance is struck between input and output? Or should one pause at the very configuration of radical politics as a synchronic system that is remarkable for its likeness to the complex of capture, accumulation, exploitation, and suspension for which remaindering is a feature rather than an accidental outcome? The former would indeed constitute a kind of cybernetic quietism that doubles the assumptions of neoclassical economism; it would rest on the premise that systemic balancing will automatically bring an end to all forms of social violence, regardless of the ways in the roots and protocols of such violence might be intricately bound with the ideal of sociality formalized as a system of inputs and outputs. Put simply, understanding disciplinary order through its outputs alone—neat semicircles of bodies, precise durations, and structured social ladders—reveals much about what remains after processes of filtering and selection that often proceed through abstract thought and diagrammatic organization; read dialectically, though, such presentations can also imply the originary and ongoing violence that is both the condition of possibility for and the outcome of formalization.

Levine’s second major intervention comes with the claim that forms do not only “totalize and unify,” but that different forms can also clash and overlap within a given situation or text.⁶⁶ In the context of this methodological intervention, and given Levine’s focus on politics as the management of “restrictive containers and boundaries,” a short passage in the Introduction to *Forms* appears particularly striking:

Even a prison cell, the grimmest of social forms, does not enforce its simple, single order in isolation. The cell itself is a straightforward enough form: it encloses bodies within surrounding walls. But the prison always activates other forms as well: prisoners are subjected to temporal patterns, including enforced daily rhythms of food, sleep, and exercise; educational trajectories; and the length of the prison term itself...And at the same time as prisoners are contained in cells, patterned in time, and linked to various networks, they are also subjected to numerous painful hierarchies, ranked according to the status of their crimes and their gender and sexual identities.⁶⁷

This account represents something like an idealized form of incarceration. It details spatial, temporal, and cultural structures—occupation; duration as measured in days, weeks, months, and years; legally mandated periods of reproduction (eating, sleeping, learning-as-reform); legally codified crime status; and gender and sexuality (race is a notable absence here) defined as discrete properties sundered from the socio-political operations that produce them—in a manner that obviates the distinction between the implementation of these phenomena in bricks, bars, and bodies and their representation in legal discourse or on a spreadsheet.⁶⁸ One might also think here of Colin Dayan’s account of her conversations with Terry Stewart, director of the Arizona Department of Corrections from 1995-2002 and a member of the team that from 2003 reformed prisons in Iraq including Abu Ghraib. Dayan recalls that in these conversations about “executions, ‘drop dead’ dates, rockbusting (requiring prisoners to spend hours each day pointlessly breaking rocks), lockdown, and classification codes” Smith’s examples relied on “mythical inmates,” so that “Instead of real prisoners, he used photographic stills in the series of films he directed about inmate work programs, chain gangs, correctional industries, and enhanced cell extractions.”⁶⁹ It is only when incarceration is abstracted in this way that it becomes possible to uphold Levine’s claim that other abstract forms (such as literature) can clash with and undo those of the cell and the sentence.

When both literature and politics are understood only as constituted forms, “the arc of a narrative” might indeed be able to “pry open a cell’s enclosing walls.”⁷⁰ It may well be possible for “a story of remorse or redemption” that “can sometimes prompt a pardon” to be understood as an example of a “surprisingly literary form [that can] occasionally cut short the time of a prison term.”⁷¹ But can one be so sure that such liberatory possibilities can be applied to concrete conditions of incarceration when one’s understanding of those conditions includes all of their contextual and constitutive phenomena? What of the preconditions for these formalizing gestures and their instantiation? Where might one locate the systems of remaindering that undergird the prison-industrial complex and that both produce and are occluded by the formalizing gestures whose outputs Levine itemizes?⁷² Attending to such questions requires one to counterpoise an account of the state-juridical (or capital- state-juridical) ideal of incarceration with concrete processes including those of racialization, the production and abjection of surplus populations, and the growth and impact of the prison-industrial complex in the context of a growing and ever-diversifying service sector. Such an analysis would register *both* unmarked ideals of abstraction or forming *and* the concrete forms of life that are captured and sundered by, but that also continue to live within and around, the uneven implementation of these ideals onto concrete situations.

Consider, for example, Tadiar’s discussion of remaindered life in the private prison system, which includes both the multiple abstractions that operate on life and the lived experience that these forms only partially capture:

With a \$10 billion portfolio, Serco recorded a 35 percent profit increase in 2011. What is the price of surplus life? Nine-year-old Naomi Leong, who was born in a Serco detention center, and her mother, Virginia Leong, a Malaysian citizen accused of trying to use a false passport, were detained for three years at a cost of about \$380,000. There are many other and more harrowing numbers one might offer in this regard, but the point is that the global “detention-industrial complex” is a business that profits from the management and warehousing of lives that function not so much as labor (though prison labor is of course part of the prison-industrial complex) but as social waste. Here, value accrues from the sheer expenditure of life-times, that is, from the work of carrying out, maintaining, controlling, and overseeing the “safe” corralling or sequestration, and often final removal and/or disposal, of these unremunerable lives for periods of varying duration (the time of detention, of sheer waiting/life wasting).⁷³

Across this passage it is possible to observe complex interactions of form and formlessness at a meeting point between two ostensibly separate spheres of post-industrial capitalism: the service economy, and remaindered life. On the one hand there is a series of formal structures: national borders and immigration law, the prison cell (or warehouse), the duration of a sentence, value-productive labor. There are also points at which the concrete movement across these abstract forms (such as undocumented migration) confers formless status, consigning racialized and gendered bodies to the category of “social waste,” unable to directly produce value and hence sequestered and temporally suspended. Finally, Tadiar’s account foregrounds specific mechanisms of remaindering, under which suspended or “waste” life is configured as a formless mass so that value-producing labor—indeed, the labor of *forming*, in the sense of corralling and managing—can be performed upon it by others, resulting in the expanding market valuation of the “service provider.” That which is eventually conceptualized as formless is thus shown to be a precondition for form in multiple ways. Firstly, it provides the social body that is divided into “human” (directly productive, formed) and “nonhuman” (non-productive, formless) life. Constituents of the latter category are also subject to diverse, violent processes that might be understood as systems of forming that function to either maintain or revise formless status, including racialization, objectification, and gendering—all of which undergird the spatial and temporal corralling of incarceration. Finally, this “waste” life, unformed from the point-of-view of accumulation and suspended from participation in “official” social life, but violently formed for purposes of constraining its conditions of identity and mobility, then becomes the raw material for a second order of accumulation, that of the service economy in which management and securitization become universal models from which a multitude of value-productive processes are derived.⁷⁴

Levine’s most overt statement about the political efficacy of the approach defined in *Forms* centers on a rejection of what she regards as a hegemonic literary-theoretical valorization of formlessness. According to this argument, because “a sexist or racist regime, for example, splits the world into a crude and comprehensive binary, its stark simplicity—black and white, masculine and feminine,” cultural theorists have “learned to look for places where the binary breaks down or dissolves, generating possibilities that turn the form into something more ambiguous and ill-defined—formless.”⁷⁵ Against this procedure, Levine’s proposal is to turn away from the notion of formlessness as automatically resistant and to instead search for ways in which different forms interfere with each other, as in the long analysis of *The Wire* that concludes her book. The alternative methodology proposed here, while germane to aspects of Levine’s, rests on

the following, quite different claim: rather than opposing ontologically stable concepts of form and formlessness in search of the literary-theoretical mode best attuned to radical politics, one might understand that form and formlessness are the specific (if plastic) outcomes of constitutive operations. “The field,” Levine writes, “has been so concerned with breaking forms apart that we have neglected to analyze the major work that forms do in our world.”⁷⁶ But, as the above analysis ought to make clear, forms are constituted through two primary operations, not one: they contain, but they also render and sunder. From this perspective neither formlessness nor the clash of forms can be assumed to automatically generate radical possibilities. Breaking things apart is a function of form. And formlessness can be both *constitutive of* and *constituted by* form.

ii) Form and the historicity of affect

Where Levine’s methodology is premised on an equation between form and the political, Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* is anchored by an “insistence on the formal dimension of affect.”⁷⁷ This insistence is positioned as a corrective to a “singular, general, universal” notion of affect that has occupied much recent critical theory across a range of disciplines, a notion whose widespread adoption is animated, Brinkema suggests, by a “drive for some magical mysterious intensity X that escapes signification.”⁷⁸ Brinkema’s resistance to such theoretical movements is primarily motivated by a defense of close analysis that is more or less consistent with the approaches pursued by Best and Marcus, Cohen, and Levine: “The one way out for affect,” she writes, “is via a way into its specificities. That approach will be called—unsurprisingly, for historically it was always the way to unlock potentialities—close reading.”⁷⁹ Equally, Brinkema’s suspicion about claims for the inherent, automatic radicality of formlessness—about claims for affect as the “*place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language*”—are consistent with the inquiry pursued here.⁸⁰ However, her proposal that a critical approach more closely attuned to the specificities of “ethics, politics, aesthetics—indeed, lives” might result from the revelation that ostensibly formless things (in this case affects) are in fact formal structures risks simply reversing the order of terms in the form/formless dualism without attending to their historicity.⁸¹

Although Brinkema’s principal aim is to reinvigorate both close formal analysis and affect theory by subordinating the latter to the former, *The Forms of the Affects* contains trace suggestions that the project might allow one to decrypt some of the specific historical operations of form and formlessness. Indeed, the very first sentence of the book calls attention to the historicity of claims for the critical primacy of affect: “Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect?” Brinkema asks. “Must one even begin an argument anymore by refuting Fredric Jameson’s infamous description of the ‘waning of affect’ in postmodernity?”⁸² Although Brinkema goes on to claim that “an intellectual history of the turn to affect would take this book too far afield” from its focus on close reading, she does foreground some symptoms of that turn, from humanities scholarship, to neuroscientific work on emotions, to the increasing mobilization of terror, disgust, anxiety, and hope in “political and popular debates.”⁸³ Given this acknowledgement of the historical specificity of affect, what further observations become possible? Despite her reticence to offer a history, Brinkema does state that she is “comfortable” in joining critics who characterize the affective turn as a response to “perceived omissions in structuralism,” a response that reawakens an “interest in problematics of embodiment in the wake of a twentieth-century Western theory that, for many, was all semiotics and no sense, all structure and no stuff.”⁸⁴ If one understands capitalism as a structuralism that is derived from and imposed in an unmarked manner onto material sociality, the broader implications of Brinkema’s

suggestion becomes clear: the affective turn is intelligible as a response to the ongoing expansion of capitalist accumulation variously described as spectacular, post-Fordist, neoliberal, and so on.

But what is the precise character of this response? On the one hand, Brinkema's suggestion that one pursue the "lines of thought" made possible by interrogating the relationships between disgust and "a cinematic grid of color," or those between "the straits of anxiety" and "a broken horizontal line," suggests a correspondence between the critical formalization of affect and the formalizing logic of capital.⁸⁵ One might note how all of these examples are developed through the analysis of films, raising the possibility that cinema performs a specific historical role as an apparatus for the formalization of affect—an argument that would be consistent with Jonathan Beller's theorization of a cinematic mode of production undergirding the shifts in accumulation listed above.⁸⁶ But it is important to note that Brinkema's formalizations appear *after* and *in response to* the historical formulation of affect as "*the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language*." So, on the other hand, although Brinkema's methodology appears to double the logic through which affect is subsumed to capital, it does so as a historically specific response to a theoretical orthodoxy that claims affect as formless and automatically resistant to the formalizing logic of capital. In other words, Brinkema's intervention, read in dialectical relation with the theoretical turns it seeks to invigorate, makes legible the process through which the assumption of automatic resistance that grounds "orthodox" notions of affect (amongst many other critical manoeuvres) occludes certain kinds of specific, materialist engagement. Inverting this tendency might reveal the formal character of cinematic affect. But tracking the complex interactions of affect and form can help to mark the difference between the labor performed across a range of positions relative to the threshold of remaindering. From this perspective, the differences between formlessness understood as inherently productive, exuberant, or resistant and the putative formlessness of remaindered life, like those between a grid of color and a broken line, might reveal not the specificities of disgust and anxiety but the distinctions between "creative" labor and precarity, or those between "human," "barely human," and "nonhuman" life.⁸⁷

4. Coda

In the middle of "a class in Political Economy VI—history and present tendencies of economics for juniors and a few sophomores," Professor Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee of Miskatonic University is possessed by an alien intelligence "enormously superior" to his own.⁸⁸ Over a period of five years, four months, and thirteen days this occupying intelligence uses Peaslee's body as a vessel in order to consult materials in the Miskatonic library and other "centers of learning" and to develop an intimacy "with leaders of occultist groups, and scholars suspected of connexion with nameless bands of abhorrent elder-world hierophants." Alongside, this the entity uses Peaslee's body to conduct a series of explorations, including "a month in the Himalayas," "a camel trip into the unknown deserts of Arabia," a journey via chartered ship to the Arctic from which he returned "showing signs of disappointment," and a period of "weeks alone beyond the limits of previous or subsequent exploration" in the "vast limestone cavern systems of west Virginia."⁸⁹

Upon the departure of this alien intelligence, and with his body and his subjectivity reunited, Peaslee resumes the lecture he was delivering five years earlier with the following sentences:

...of the orthodox economists of that period, Jevons typifies the prevailing trend toward scientific correlation. His attempt to link the commercial cycle of prosperity and depression with the physical cycle of the solar spots forms perhaps the apex of...⁹⁰

At the exact moment of his possession Peaslee was expounding on a paper by the nineteenth-century economist William Stanley Jevons, whose work was instrumental in the ostensible introduction of scientific method to the discipline and in driving the “marginal revolution” that shaped the early stages of neoclassical economics by overwriting the primacy of exchange value with an arcanelly quantified version of use value. But the specific work about which Peaslee is speaking is not Jevons’s *A General Mathematical Theory of Political Economy* (1862) or *Theory of Political Economy* (1871), the texts often identified as central to the emergence of mathematical economics and marginalism. It is “Commercial Crises and Sun-Spots,” a relatively minor work from 1878 in which the economist speculates on a direct link between business and solar cycles—an inquiry in which he freely admits that he has been “thoroughly biased in favor of a theory,” and that the evidence he has assembled “would have no weight if standing by itself.”⁹¹

I began this essay by evoking the intersections of imagined formlessness and baleful racialization in Lovecraft, and by suggesting that these intersections might reveal more than the individual, subjective racism of a single author. Having worked through the logics and implications of form as it is imbricated with capitalist racialization and associated systems of thought and analysis, the appearance of Jevons at the threshold of an uncanny encounter with formlessness in Lovecraft reveals much about the historical dynamics that can be gleaned not only from the work of that author but also from the work of others for whom formlessness is either explicitly or implicitly abject. Viewed as a discursive formation and set against the Marxian historical categories of accumulation and subsumption, a striking affinity between the sun-spots essay and Jevons’s major work on marginalism emerges not in the specific argument the former presents but in the methodological assumption that grounds it. As Philip Mirowski has shown, the writings most often associated with the marginalist revolution are marked by the deployment of concepts from physics—most commonly energy—in a manner that is premised on ignorance, whether strategic or not, about significant details of said concepts. Writing on a passage from *Theory of Political Economy* concerning “the equality of the ratios of marginal utility of two goods” and “the law of the lever,” for example, Mirowski notes that Jevons demonstrates little understanding of the latter beyond “the equilibrium conditions of rational mechanics.” For Jevons (and, Mirowski implies, for marginalists more generally) it was “enough to be captivated by the image of mental energy suffusing a commodity space in order to ‘discover’ that prices were proportional to marginal utilities.”⁹² In other words, both the work on marginal utility and the essay on sun-spots are premised on an imaginary that conflates the objects of physics with those of economics—or, the realms of the real and the symbolic—while implicitly disavowing anything that cannot be resolved to the logic of the latter. The outcome of this conflation, as Mirowski puts it elsewhere and with a slightly different emphasis, is an imaginary in which “the substratum of market relations works well naturally and can only be undermined by external natural shocks.”⁹³

Moving closer to the present, versions of the marginalist imaginary posit a world in which production (in the sense of value-producing activity) can exist without reproduction and, thus, without racialization, gendering, and the production of surplus populations even as all of those processes continue to be foundational to regimes of

accumulation. Such imaginaries furnish both celebratory and critical discourses of service-based accumulation that flatten the differences between “services” provided through web pages, spas, nail salons, fast food restaurants, agencies that manage domestic helpers, and prisons. And they permit dispossession and incarceration to be figured as problems of management while both requiring and occluding the material necessity that such “services” must be centered on the production and then the securitization and management of “waste” life. In other words, the principles of marginalism exemplify the type of imaginary I have been tracking throughout this essay, in which all that can be posited as form is primary, and all that cannot appears negligible or even nonexistent even as it functions as a prerequisite for the forms that occlude it.

With the historical complex of form and formlessness whose contours are tracked across this essay in mind, what can one say about the story that centers on the sole appearance of an economist in Lovecraft’s oeuvre? On the one hand, the entity that possesses Nathaniel Peaslee is subject to all of the abjecting and racializing language for which Lovecraft is infamous: consider, for example, the narrator’s observations about the effect of his appearance and behavior upon acquaintances, physicians, and psychologists:

Something in my aspect and speech seemed to excite vague fears and aversions in everybody I met, as if I were a being infinitely removed from all that is normal and healthful. This idea of a black, hidden horror connected with incalculable gulfs of some sort of *distance* was oddly widespread and persistent.⁹⁴

In the difference between the Jevons-citing economist and the being “infinitely removed” from all that is normal, it is possible to observe a shift of protocol, from a system of norms and calculations that is easily recognizable for its close imbrication with capitalist social formations to a position that appears to be the opposite—incalculable, “abnormal,” formless. But, on the other hand, the being that possesses Peaslee is later revealed to be a member of a “Great Race” that has escaped the strictures of concrete space and “conquered the secret of time” by the method of mental projection, and is thus able to roam in time and space, animate the body and subjectivity of any living being with its own, and assemble vast archives of information from social systems past and present. So the “Great Race” simultaneously evokes something like the ideal form of capital—an expansionist, immaterial information network, connected to everything, and able to seamlessly remake matter, bodily capacities and subjectivity alike in its image—and the concrete impossibility of this ideal form’s full realization, an impossibility that is manifested in the production of racialized, gendered, non- and not-yet human, and surplus or (later) remaindered life, but also in incalculable forms of survival, reproduction, and rebellion. And when this contradictory formulation appears—when Peaslee is possessed—it interrupts a particularly overt record of the will to naturalize it in the form of a lecture about what can now be understood as the origin of today’s economic-theoretical orthodoxy. What appears in “The Shadow Out of Time” is not exactly an allegory. Rather, it is a diagram showing that appeals for the primacy of form must always be read dialectically. Or, it is a diagram of the historical dynamics of form and formlessness as they function *and* fail to regulate the impositions of capital.

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Notes

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¹ H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), in *Necronomicon: the Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (London: Gollancz, 2008), p.201; p.206; p.209; p.214; p.216; p.220; p.223.

² H.P. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” (1929), in *Necronomicon*, p.276; p.277; p.297.

³ H.P. Lovecraft, “From Beyond” (1934), in *Necronomicon*, p.387; p.388; p.389; p.390; p.391.

⁴ See, for example, Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012).

⁵ Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”, *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015), p.160. Also see Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. Dorna Khazeni, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2006).

⁶ The concept of racialization used here and throughout is that described by Alexander G. Weheliye, following the work of W.E.B. Dubois, Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter: “racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.” Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p.3. Also see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p.223: “we need to recognize the technology of race...precisely as those historic repertoires and cultural, spatial and signifying systems that stigmatize and depreciate one form of humanity for the purposes of another’s health, development, safety, profit or pleasure.”

⁷ Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” p.208, p.208, p.210, p.211, p.222.

⁸ Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long, March 21st 1922, in *H.P. Lovecraft: Selected Letters 1911-1924*, ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrel (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965), p.333.

⁹ See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, p.309.

¹¹ For a critique of such equations see Jord/ana Rosenberg, “The Molecularization of Sexuality,” *Theory and Event* 17:2 (2014).

¹² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Ernst Wangermann, *Karl Marx: Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 28 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p.286; Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labor,” in *Value: the Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 2015), p.174. Italics added.

¹³ See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p.14-15.

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, “Formless,” in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, trans. Iain White (London: Atlas Press, 1995), pp.51-52.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “[T]he timeless mode of reasoning, and even the knowledge of nature necessary in commodity producing societies is based on the pattern of the exchange abstraction, on

the commodity form.” Alfred Sohn-Rethel, “Historical Materialist Theory of Knowledge,” *Marxism Today* (April 1965), p.122.

¹⁸ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p.243.

¹⁹ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, p.45.

²⁰ See: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), especially pp.478-498; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), p.45. Italics in original. Frank B. Wilderson, III directly equates rationality, the symbolic, and the wage. See Frank B. Wilderson, III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society,” *Social Identities* 9:2 (2003), p.230.

²² In this context noise has a highly specific meaning: it describes the aggregate of all possibilities, from which a given signal is one possible selection. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

²³ Michel Serres, “Platonic Dialogue,” in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.66.

²⁴ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.13. Bernhard Siegert suggests that the “point of departure” in Serres’s theorization “was to replace [the] categorical distinction between *symbol*, as defined by logicians, and *signal*, as defined by information theorists, with *the very problem of distinction*,” thus inquiring into “the conditions that enable this distinction in the first place.” Bernhard Siegert, “Cacography or Communication? Cultural Techniques of Sign-Signal Distinction,” in *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p.20.

²⁵ See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp.15-16

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Ernst Wangermann, *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 28 (London; Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p.173.

²⁷ Serres, *The Parasite*, p.12. Neferti X.M. Tadiar describes this remainder as “the unabsorbed residue of an epistemic translation and real subsumption of ‘non-human’ [by which she means those who are excluded from and do not aspire to participation in free markets and liberal-democratic rules of law] forms of life by capitalist production and exchange.” Neferti X.M. Tadiar, “Decolonization, ‘Race,’ and Remaindered Life Under Empire,” *Qui Parle* 23:2 (2015), p.154.

²⁸ Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), pp.60-61

²⁹ Franco Barchiesi evokes the structure of this disavowal when he writes: “Liberalism has crucially revolved, well before ‘neo’-liberalism, around a discursive apparatus that casts non-working subjects, those who refuse capitalist employment discipline, and those claiming the decommodification of life through the redistribution of resources as deviant cases, not so much on account of their statistical import alone but because liberal rationality renders jobseeking and the investment of psychic energies into the labor market as coextensive with empowerments and freedoms that axiomatically coincide with the common good.” Franco Barchiesi, “Precarity as Capture: A Conceptual

Reconstruction and Critique of the Worker-Slave Analogy,” *UniNomade* (2012), <http://www.uninomade.org/precarity-as-capture/> (accessed 11/1/2015).

³⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), p.345.

³¹ Endnotes, “The Logic of Gender,” *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class, and Other Misfortunes* (2013), p.62.

³² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p.784.

³³ Or, as Gavin Walker puts it, primitive accumulation functions as “the process of the formation and capture of difference.” Gavin Walker, “Primitive Accumulation and the Formation of Difference: on Marx and Schmitt,” *Rethinking Marxism* 23:3 (2011), p.386.

³⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.115; Marx, *Capital*, p.874.

³⁵ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), p.9.

³⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p.251.

³⁷ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, p.2. In the same passage Weheliye goes on to note that such expressions: “ought not to be understood within the lexicons of resistance and agency, because, as explanatory tools, these concepts have a tendency to blind us, whether through strenuous denials or exalted celebrations of their existence, to the manifold occurrences of freedom in zones of indistinction. As modes of analyzing and imagining the practices of the oppressed in the face of extreme violence—although this is also applicable more broadly—resistance and agency assume full, self-present, and coherent subjects working against something or someone. Which is not to say that agency and resistance are completely irrelevant in this context, just that we might come to a more layered and improvisatory understanding of extreme subjection if we do not decide in advance what forms its disfigurements should take on.”

³⁸ For a critique of Hardt and Negri (and other theorists of real subsumption as the total valorization of social life) on these grounds see Timothy Brennan, “The Empire’s New Clothes,” *Critical Inquiry* 29:2 (2003).

³⁹ “...the general law of capital accumulation is that—concomitant with its growth—capital produces a relatively redundant population out of the mass of workers, which then tends to become a consolidated surplus population, absolutely redundant to the needs of capital.” Endnotes and Aaron Benanav, “Misery and Debt,” *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value Form* (2010), p.30.

⁴⁰ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” p.238. This role is, of course, doubled in political philosophy; as Wilderson writes elsewhere, “exploited Humans (in the throes of class conflict with unexploited Humans) seized the image of the Slave as an enabling vehicle that animated the evolving discourses of their own imagination, just as unexploited Humans had seized the flesh of the Slave to increase their profits.” Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, p.19. Also see Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

⁴¹ Neferti X.M. Tadiar, “Life-Times in Fate Playing,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111: 4 (2012), p.789. Endnotes and Benanav evoke several of the effects of such processes but miss their value-productive aspects when they state: “Any question of the absorption of this surplus humanity has been put to rest. It exists now only to be managed: segregated into prisons, marginalised in ghettos and camps, disciplined by the police, and annihilated by war.” Endnotes and Benanav, “Misery and Debt,” p.51.

⁴² Tadiar, “Life-Times,” p.789.

⁴³ Marx, *Capital*, p.288.

⁴⁴ Tadiar, “Life-Times,” p.798.

⁴⁵ See Alexander R. Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013) and "The Cybernetic Hypothesis," *Differences* 25:1 (2014).

⁴⁶ See my book *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* for a longer account of the historical emergence and cultural resonance of this formation.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," *Criticism* 55:2 (2013), p.263.

⁴⁸ Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," p.251.

⁴⁹ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: an Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (2009), p.2.

⁵⁰ Or, as Rosenberg puts it, the realization that surfaces themselves do not open "unmediatedly onto an ontological Real." Jord/ana Rosenberg, "The Birth of Theory and the Long Shadow of the Dialectic," *PMLA* 130.3 (2015), p.802.

⁵¹ Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," p.6.

⁵² Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, p.3.

⁵³ Margaret Cohen, "Narratology in the Archive of Literature," *Representations* 101: 1 (2009), p.61. Cohen's "just enough reading" builds on Marcus's earlier concept of "just reading." See Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.3, pp.75-76.

⁵⁴ Cohen, "Narratology in the Archive of Literature," p.63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ It is notable that Cohen identifies the correlation between the steering of ships and information processing through a reference to Norbert Wiener's definition of cybernetics—a conceptual cluster that, as suggested above, forms one of the core epistemic levers for the mutation of capital accumulation in the second half of the twentieth century. See Cohen, "Narratology in the Archive of Literature," pp.66-67.

⁵⁸ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), p.2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁶¹ Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," p.247.

⁶² Levine, *Forms*, p.3.

⁶³ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p.3.

⁶⁴ Serres, "Platonic Dialogue", p.66.

⁶⁵ Levine, *Forms*, p.18.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁶⁸ For an account of the tension between legal abstraction and the materiality upon which the files that codify them are premised, see Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁶⁹ Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p.xv.

⁷⁰ Levine, *Forms*, p.8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² The exemplary account of these dynamics is, of course, found across the essays comprising Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003). On abstraction in law and in racialization see Brenna Bhandar, "Property, Law, and Race: Modes of Abstraction," *UC Irvine Law Review* 4:1 (2014).

⁷³ Tadiar, "Life-Times in Fate Playing," p.791.

⁷⁴ The ‘services’ described on the “Justice and Immigration” section of Serco’s corporate website include “custodial services,” “immigration control,” “community services,” and “housing services.” The same page states that “our capabilities range from change management to service delivery management and operations—all underpinned by Serco’s combination of commercial know-how and a deep public service ethos.”

<https://www.serco.com/markets/homeaffairs>.

⁷⁵ Levine, *Forms*, p.9.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p.xv.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.xiv.

⁷⁹ Ibid. “The turn to affect,” Brinkema writes, “has corresponded with a disciplinary turn away from detail, from specificity and the local, from the very groundings for the persuasions germane to defending any theoretical movement” (p.xvi).

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.xiv. Italics in original.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.xv.

⁸² Ibid., p.xi.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.xvi.

⁸⁶ See Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006).

⁸⁷ Or, as Tadiar puts it, the difference between “high-value ‘creative workers’ in Web 2.0 industries [and] the unvalorizable lives of ‘unskilled’ women workers in global manufacturing factories in Mexico and China. Beyond the certainly significant quantitative differences in remuneration between these two kinds of life, there are crucial qualitative differences between their definitive characteristics and functions within the biopolitical economy of capital. In contrast to the life as interest-bearing capital of the former—that is, life with accumulable value transmissible across generations (through the augmented cultural and educational capital of their progeny as well as through inheritable material wealth)—the life of the Mexican maquiladora worker, as Melissa Wright shows, is of diminishing value, operating on a trajectory of consumption and eventual waste.” “Life-Times in fate Playing,” p.787.

⁸⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, “The Shadow out of Time,” in *Necronomicon: the Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (London: Gollancz, 2008), p.557, p.559.

⁸⁹ Lovecraft, “The Shadow out of Time,” pp.558-559.

⁹⁰ Lovecraft, “the Shadow out of Time,” p.560.

⁹¹ William Stanley Jevons, “Commercial Crises and Sun-Spots,” *Nature* (November 4th 1878), p.35.

⁹² Philip Mirowski, *More Heat than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics and Nature’s Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.218.

⁹³ Ibid., p.49.

⁹⁴ Lovecraft, “The Shadow out of Time,” p.558.